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THE

MOSAICS

OF

THE CUPOLA IN THE "CAPPELLA CHIGIANA"

OF

STA. MARIA DEL POPOLO IN ROME.

DESIGNED BY

RAFFAELLE SANZIO D' URBINO.

ENGRAVED AND EDITED

BY

LEWIS GRUNER.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY PAUL & DOMINIC COLNAGHI & CO.,

13, & 14, PALL MALL EAST.

MDCCCL.

PRINTED IN GREAT-BRITAIN

LONDON:
BRADBURY AND EVANS, PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE "Cappella Chigiana," the second on the left of the entrance in the Church of Sa. Maria del Popolo in Rome, was built by Agostino Chigi, one of the wealthiest merchants of his age, as a family chapel and burial-place. Chigi, called by contemporary writers "Il Magnifico," was a munificent and enlightened patron of the Arts; brought by his tastes, his wealth, and his pursuits, in contact with the great, he was in habits of intimacy both with Julius II. and Leo X. It was natural that Raphael's growing fame should awaken the interest of such a man, and Chigi contributed to the development of the artist's genius by extensively employing him, and by bringing him under the notice of the Pope, and of other Italian Princes. Among the greatest works that were executed by Raphael for Agostino Chigi, may be enumerated the frescoes in the Loggia of the Casino Chigi, now called the Farnesina, representing the fable of Cupid and Psyche; the Sybils and Prophets painted also in fresco in the Church of Sta. Maria della Pace, and the architecture and decorations of the Cappella Chigiana. This octagonal Chapel, built in the Corinthian style, is surmounted by a small dome or cupola with a lantern, through which the Chapel receives the light.* It is the interior of the cupola that is ornamented, after Raphael's cartoons, by the mosaics represented in the following Plates.

The subject of these mosaics appears to be, the created world before the heavenly bodies had received the Divine command to begin their revolutions through space: that is, before the beginning of time. The centre of the dome is filled with a grand representation, in mosaic, of the Almighty surrounded by angels, on a panel encircled and completed by an egg-and-tongue moulding, and a graceful meander of gilt stucco. This is the light or eye of the cupola, to which it is joined by a circle of graceful modillions and panels with small rosettes, likewise of gilt stucco. From the outward edge of this circle radiate sixteen lines of similar ornaments, composed of the same meander and egg mouldings, but so intersected at different distances by two circles of mouldings, as to form, first, sixteen compartments of two different sizes, and, beyond these, the eight larger compartments, which contain the beautiful composition in mosaics; on smaller spaces, between each of these, are represented gilt candelabra upon greyish panels; and an outward and last circle of compartments, cut off in the middle by the extreme limit of the cupola, terminates one of the finest symbolic pictures that Raphael's genius ever conceived. Here the universe is represented according to the theory of Ptolemy and Aristotle, which was superseded, since Raphael's times, by the systems of Copernicus and Newton.† Thus, we see at the

* On the Architecture of this Chapel, see Letarouilly's "Rome Moderne." Paris: Vol. I.

† Macrobius, in Somn. Scip., ii., 4, says: "There are eight moveable spheres; the first is the firmament of the fixed stars moving from east to west; then follow the seven planets revolving from west to east; the earth is the ninth sphere, and is immoveable."

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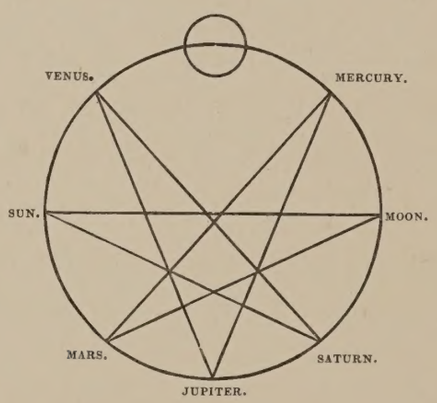
right hand of the Almighty, Apollo (the sun); at the left, Diana (the moon); then Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, Mercury, and the fixed stars; these being placed upon a globe. Each of the planets is under the guidance of an angel, in the attitude of waiting for the sign from above, according to the mediæval thought thus expressed by Dante, viz. :—

> "Lo moto e la virtù dei santi giri
> Come dal fabbro l'arte del martello,
> Da beati motor convien che spiri."
>
> PARADISO, c. ii., v. 127-129.

and more explicitly in c. viii., v. 37, c. xxviii., vv. 98-129, and c. xxix., v. 53. There, the nine heavens, or heavenly bodies, are stated to be moved and guided by angels, of different hierarchies; the guides of the heaven of the Moon being angels; those of Mercury, archangels; and those of Venus, thrones. Raphael deviated from Dante's astronomy so far as to distribute the planets in a slightly different order; evidently for the double purpose of placing the eighth sphere, from which the light proceeds, above the planets, and the more luminous globes, the sun and the moon, by the side of the Creator; doing here what he did again in the Loggia of the Vatican, in his picture of "The Creation of the Sun and Moon," where the sun is on the right, and the moon on the left hand of the Almighty. Raphael's disposition of the planets is that of the Egyptians, as given by Dio Cassius (Rom. Hist., xxxvii., 17, 18), according to which, each day of the week was assigned to one of them. The system of this distribution, he says, was either that of the *Diatesseron* in music, or the astrological theory, according to which, the planets rule in succession the different hours of the day, and each day derives its name from the planet that rules its first hour. The natural order of the planets, and that of the days connected with them, is seen in the following heptagram, or mystical symbol, which frequently occurs in Egyptian antiquities :—



It will be seen that by assigning twenty-four planets, in the succession indicated by the Heptagram, to the twenty-four hours of each day, the twenty-fifth planet rules the first hour of the succeeding day and gives it its name.

The signs of the Zodiac are joined to the different planets, in accordance with the opinion of the ancient astronomers, that, at the moment of their creation, the Sun was placed in the sign of Leo, the Moon in Cancer, Mercury in Virgo, Venus in Libra, Mars in Scorpio, Jupiter in Sagittarius, and Saturn in Capricorn. Hence the planets were supposed to be the rulers of the signs. Five signs of the Zodiac remained undistributed, and were appended to the five last-mentioned planets, but in an inverted order, so that Aquarius was joined to Saturn, Pisces to Jupiter, Aries to Mars, Taurus to Venus, and Gemini to Mercury. Macrobius (Somn. Scip., i., 21), gives an account of this astronomical theory, according to which, the sign of Aquarius, which is not seen in Raphael's composition, would be placed behind the cherub on the sphere of Saturn.

That Raphael in his compositions availed himself of Christian types and of symbols derived from Paganism, can hardly be wondered at, if we consider that Christian artists and poets of all ages, even he who sang of Hell, of Purgatory,

and of Paradise, have adopted this mixture of heathen mythology with their Christian allegories, which, if at all allowable, is to be admitted in Art, as by this union the painter may exhibit in the same work, as Raphael has done in this, the pure grandeur of the antique Grecian style, and that of the modern Italian school in all its loveliness and splendour. The colouring of these mosaics being given on the last plate, we have only to add that the admirable conception of Raphael was either realised at first by too feeble a hand, or that the mosaic suffered much from time, or, more probably, from the unskilful repairs executed in 1651.

The only record we have of their history, is that of Fioravante Martinelli, in his "Roma ricercata nel suo sito," page 125. There he states, that the mosaics in the Cappella Chigi were finished in the year 1516, by Aloisio da Pace, Veneziano, otherwise called Maestro Luisaccio, who placed his monogram on the torch of Cupid in the sign of Venus. Upon close inspection, in the preparation of the following engravings, it was found thus :—

L. V.

D. P.

V.

F.

The date 1516 is placed to the right of the torch.

With this corroboration we cannot but give credit to the statement of Martinelli, although the name of this Aloisio or Luigi de Pace is entirely unknown in the history of the Fine Arts. It is, indeed, not improbable that Raphael employed a Venetian artist to execute these mosaics, and the characters of the inscription are arranged like those of several monograms on different mosaic works in S. Mark, at Venice.

The cupola suffered considerably also in 1527, when Rome was invaded by the Imperial troops, by whom the Church of Sa. Maria del Popolo was plundered and severely damaged ; but in the year 1651, a descendant of Agostino Chigi, the Cardinal Fulvio Chigi (afterwards Pope Alexander VII., who raised the Chigi family to the rank of princes), ordered the Chapel to be repaired under the direction of Bernini. It appears that sufficient care was not then bestowed upon the mosaics ; the surface ought to have been restored to a more even level, as its present inequalities impair the general effect ; the original inscription on the starred globe might also with advantage have been replaced ; it is now wholly obliterated, but is supposed to have been the Scriptural text, from the fourteenth verse of the first chapter of Genesis : "Fiant luminaria in firmamento cœli," which has been replaced here in its proper position in the fourth Plate. It is hoped that the work itself, without the assistance of any further explanation, will convey an accurate and lasting impression of this great monument of Italian art.

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